

Training and Mentoring programme



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Module 6: Work-related stress management

Abstract

Module 5 provides learners insight into the definition and the key features of stress. The Module is divided into 3 units of 2 and a half hours duration each. You will learn what stress is and what threads it represents for individuals and organisations. We will have a closer look at the causes of stress at the workplace and discuss strategies to assess, prevent and reduce it. Finally, we will introduce the concept of stress resilience and provide some tips and exercises for active coping.

Learning Units:

Learning Unit 1 – What is stress.

Learning Unit 2 – Causes of stress at workplace.

Learning Unit 3 – Work-related stress prevention and management

At the end of each unit, you will be asked to complete a multiple-choice test. The last test will also include a reflective open question.

Learning outcomes

At the end of this Module, the learners will:

Learning outcome 1: Understand what stress is, how people react to stress and what are the consequences of stress for individuals and organisations;

Learning outcome 2: Know common causes of work-related stress.

Learning outcome 3: Be able to assess the main stressors at workplace.

Learning outcome 4: Be able to propose and apply strategies to prevent work-related stress.

Learning outcome 5: Be able to apply solutions to manage and reduce stress at the workplace.

Keywords

Work-related stress, stress at workplace, stress prevention, stress management, stress resilience

Identity of the Module	
Module	Work-related stress management
Short description of the module / abstract	<p>Module 5 titled “Work-related stress management” provides learners with information about how to deal with stress which is related to the work situation. The Module is divided into 3 units with a total duration of 2 and a half hours. You will learn what stress is and what challenges it represents for individuals and organisations. We will have a closer look at the causes of stress in the workplace and discuss strategies to assess, prevent and reduce it. Finally, we will introduce the concept of resilience and provide some tips and exercises for active coping.</p> <p>At the end of this Module, the learners will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ understand what stress is, how people react to stress and what are the consequences of stress for individuals and organisations. ➤ know common causes of work-related stress. ➤ be able to assess the main stressors in the workplace. ➤ be able to propose and apply strategies to prevent work-related stress. ➤ be able to apply solutions to manage and reduce stress at the workplace. <p>At the end of each unit, you will be asked to complete a multiple-choice test. The last test will also include a reflective open question.</p>
Learning Outcomes	<p>At the end of this Module, learners will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ understand what stress is, how people react to stress and what are the consequences of stress for individuals and organisations; ➤ know common causes of work-related stress. ➤ be able to assess the main stressors in the workplace. ➤ be able to propose and apply strategies to prevent work-related stress. ➤ be able to apply solutions to manage and reduce stress at the workplace.
Learning Units	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>What is stress</i> 2. <i>Causes of stress at workplace</i> 3. <i>Work-related stress prevention and management</i>

Learning core material	Learning Unit		Learning Material	
	<i>What is stress</i>		<i>Text, Presentation, videos</i>	
	<i>Causes of stress at workplace</i>		<i>Text, Presentation, videos, worksheets</i>	
	<i>Work-related stress prevention and management</i>		<i>Text, articles, worksheets</i>	
Assessment method	Learning Unit		Assessment	
	<i>What is stress</i>		<i>Multiple choice</i>	
	<i>Causes of stress at workplace</i>		<i>Multiple choice</i>	
	<i>Work-related stress prevention and management</i>		<i>Multiple choice and open questions</i>	
Workload (Estimated study time) (min)	150 minutes + 30 minutes (for the assessment)			
Author(s)	CESIE			
Reviewers	Yang Yang, Konstantinos Giannakopoulos, PULSO			

Dear participants,

My name is Francesca Conti from CESIE, and I welcome you to Module 5 “Work-related stress management.”

The aims of the Module are to:

- explain what stress is and what threads it represents for individuals and organisations;
- look closer to the causes of stress in the workplace.
- discuss the importance of stress risk assessment.
- propose strategies to prevent and reduce stress in the workplace.
- discuss the importance of stress resilience and provide some tips and exercises for active coping.

The Module is **structured** in three learning units, namely:

1. What is stress
2. Causes of stress at workplace
3. Work-related stress prevention and management

Chapter 1 defines stress and discusses the individuals’ reaction to stress. It also explains how work-related stress affects organisations and their performance.

Chapter 2 presents common causes of stress at the workplace divided into work contents and work context.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to work-related stress prevention and management, discussing the importance of the HR department in managing stress at the workplace, presenting the process of stress risk assessment, prevention and offering possible solutions to different causes of work-related stress. Finally, the chapter provides some ideas on how to increase individuals’ stress resilience and the ability to calm down and cope with stressful situations.

Finally, your **assessment** consists of 3 tests with multiple choice to be completed at the competition of each unit.

1. Learning Unit 1 - What is stress

Stress is the **body's reaction** to **feeling threatened, or under pressure, facing a challenge or demand**.

Originally, stress was conceived as pressure from **the environment**, then as strain **within the person**. The generally accepted definition today is one of **interaction between the situation and the individual**. It is the **psychological** and **physical** state that results when the **resources of the individual are not sufficient to cope** with the demands and pressures of the situation (Michie, 2002).

Stress is a feeling of **emotional or physical tension**. It can come from any event or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry, or nervous.

The degree of stress experienced by individuals depends on the functioning of **two protective physiological mechanisms: alarm reaction and adaptation**.

Alarm reaction

When confronted with a threat, the first response is **physiological arousal**: muscles tense and breathing and heart rate become more rapid. The natural reaction to such stress is “**fight or flight**”. Present day threats tend to be more psychological—for example, unjustified verbal attack by a superior at work. In such situations, it is usually not socially acceptable to act by “fight or flight” (Michie, 2002).

Adaptation

The second adaptive mechanism allows us to cease responding after learning more about the stress stimuli and understanding the source of stress in the environment is no longer a threat to our safety. Over time, our response dwindles. If this process did not function, we would eventually collapse from physical wear and tear, and mental exhaustion (Michie, 2002).

1.1 Acute versus chronic stress

In short bursts, stress can be **positive**, such as when it helps you avoid danger or meet a deadline. But when stress lasts for a long time, it may harm your health.

- **Acute stress** is short-term stress that goes away quickly. It occurs in potentially dangerous situations such as during a fight, or when you do something new or exciting such as starting a new job. This type of stress is very useful because it helps you manage these situations. All people experience acute stress from time to time.
- **Chronic stress**, on the other hand, is stress that **lasts for a longer** period of time and is usually caused by an unsatisfactory life or work situation, such as an unhappy marriage, money problems, or troubles at job. Any type of stress that goes on **for**

weeks or months is chronic stress. People suffering from chronic stress can become so used to it that they don't realise it is a problem. If chronic stress is not managed, it may lead to serious health problems (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2022).

1.2 Reactions to stress

People react differently to stressful situations – their resistance to stress as well as manifestation of stress reaction can vary widely. However, some common signs of stress can be seen in changes of people's **feeling, behaviour, and physical symptoms**. See some examples below.

Feelings	Behaviour	Physical symptoms
Anxiety	Being withdrawn	Palpitations
Depression	Acting aggressive	Headaches
Irritability	Being tearful	Nausea
Fatigue	Being unmotivated	Excessive sweating
Hyper sensibility	Acting impatient	Tiredness or insomnia

Employees working under enormous pressure are more likely to encounter difficulties of **concentration, decision making and problem solving**. They also can be hypersensitive to criticism (Michie, 2002).

If stress persists, the body stays alert and there are changes in **neuroendocrine, cardiovascular, autonomic, and immunological functioning**, leading to **physical and mental illnesses**, typically high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, depression, or anxiety (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2022).

1.3 Stress at the workplace

According to the World Health Organization, work-related stress is the response people may have when presented with **work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities** and which challenge their ability to cope. Stress occurs in a wide range of work circumstances but is often made worse when employees feel they have **little support from supervisors and colleagues**, as well as **little control over work processes**. On the other hand, workers are **less likely to experience work-related stress** when demands and pressures of work are **matched** to their **knowledge and abilities**, they feel confident and have **control** over the work, receive **support** from supervisors and colleagues, and can **participate** in decisions that concern their jobs (World Health Organization, 2020).

Numerous company surveys show that modern workers feel stressed out on the job, affecting their **sleep, health, relationships, productivity and sense of well-being**. Coronavirus pandemic brought additional pressure because of furloughs, job losses, worries about getting sick, feeling isolated while working remotely (Wilkie, 2020).

Stress in work context can **undermine the achievement of goals**, both for individuals and for organisations.

Problems of stress	
Threats on individual level	Workplace and organisation level
Physical and mental health	Increased absenteeism and presenteeism
Overall well-being and quality of life	Reduced quantity and quality of work
Functioning and goal achievement	Reduced job satisfaction and morale (harassment, violence at work, etc.)
Self-esteem and confidence	Poor communication and increased conflicts
Personal and professional development	Problems with recruitment and increased turnover

Table resource: Michie, 2002

1.4 Pressure versus stress

Some amount of pressure is unavoidable at almost any workplace. The contemporary work environment can be very demanding and competitive. Some fields are naturally more likely to produce significant pressure, such as **medical professions, nurses, caregivers, social workers, soldiers and top chief officers** (Examples of the most stressful jobs, Indeed 2021).

Reasonable work challenges or pressure perceived by an individual as acceptable may be positive, keeping workers **alert, motivated, able to work and learn**. However, when that pressure becomes **excessive** or otherwise **unmanageable** it leads to stress. Stress can damage an employees' health and business performance (World Health Organization, 2020).

To complete this Learning Unit, you have to:

- Read the text above
- Watch the following videos:
 - o Stress 101 - Understanding Stress and How to Manage It – Health Texas Medical Group: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Hto1HeMrYQ>
 - o Good Stress Vs. Bad Stress, University of California Television: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhscx8Dwn94>
 - o How Job Stress Affects Your Health | WSJ video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lHgWwSGZ-o>
- Test your individual stress level: <https://www.stress.org.uk/individual-stress-test/>

2. Learning Unit 2 - Causes of stress at the workplace

Work-related stress is mostly caused by **poor work organisation, poor work design, poor management, unsatisfactory working conditions, and lack of support** (World Health Organization, 2020).

Poor work organisation and design are structural problems in a company or organisation not providing clear and coherent job description, appropriate workload, clearly set processes and operations. **Poor management** may include lack of control and support, excessive control, overlapping supervising roles and conflict of roles, or poor management skills. **Unhealthy human relations** at the workplace are also very strong stressors, extreme cases include bossing, mobbing, bullying or harassment.

According to the World Health Organisation (2020), work-related stress hazards can be divided into **work content** and **work context**.

Work contents:

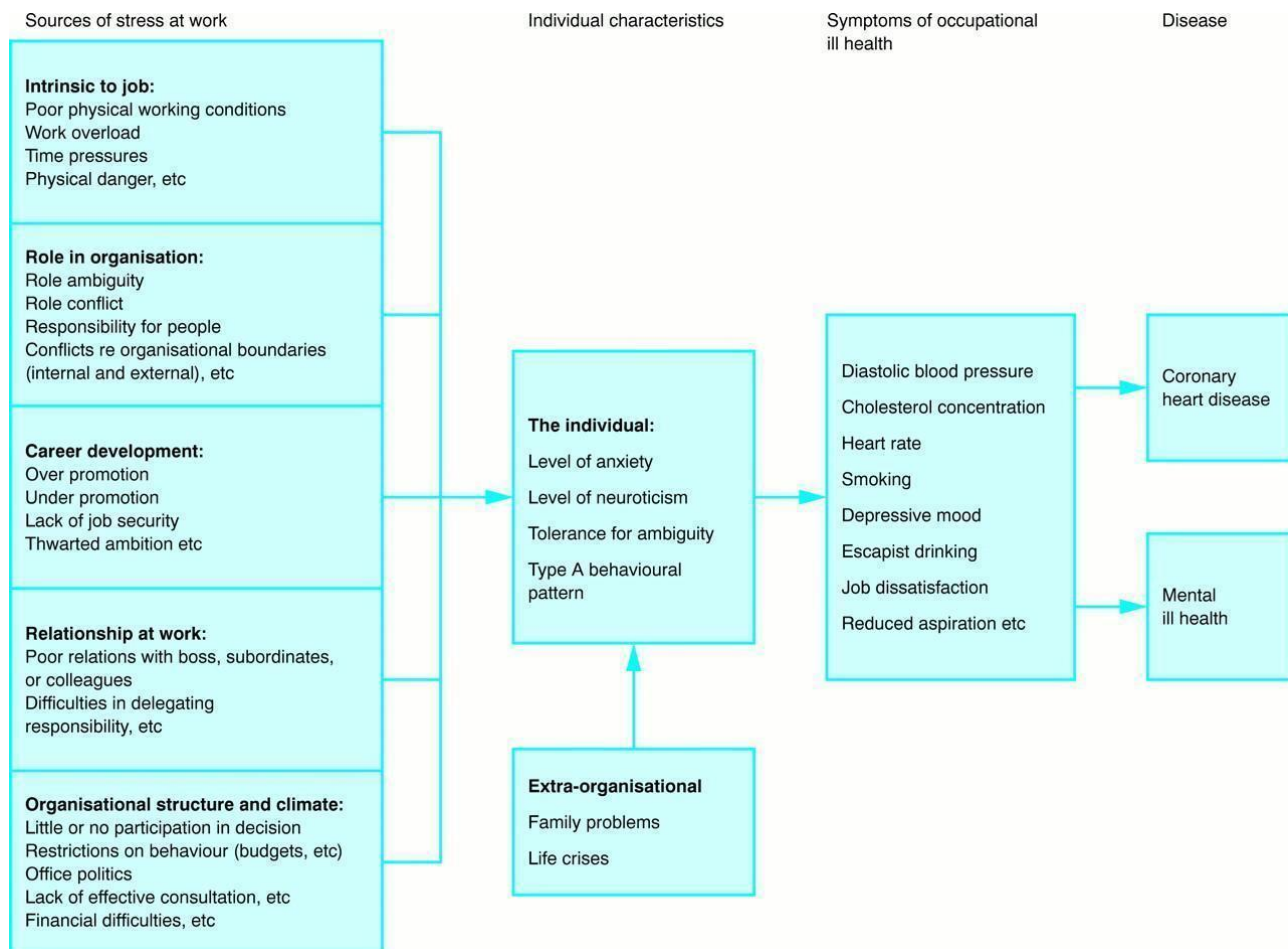
- **job content** (monotony, under-stimulation, meaningless of tasks, lack of variety, etc.);
- **workload and work pace** (too much or too little to do, work under time pressure, etc.);
- **working hours** (strict or inflexible, long and unsocial, unpredictable, badly designed shift systems);
- **participation and control** (lack of participation in decision-making, lack of control over work processes, pace, hours, methods, and the work environment).

Work context:

- **career development, status and pay** (job insecurity, lack of promotion opportunities, under- or over-promotion, work of low social value, piece rate payment schemes, unclear or unfair performance evaluation systems, being over- or under-skilled for a job);
- **the worker's role in the organisation** (unclear role, conflicting roles);
- **interpersonal relationships** (inadequate, inconsiderate or unsupportive supervision, poor relationships with colleagues, bullying/harassment and violence, isolated or solitary work, etc.);
- **organisational culture** (poor communication, poor leadership, lack of behavioural rule, lack of clarity about organisational objectives, structures and strategies);
- **work-life balance** (conflicting demands of work and home, lack of support for domestic problems at work, lack of support for work problems at home, lack of organisational rules and policies to support work-life balance).

Excessive demands leading to work-related stress are sometimes embedded in **highly competitive and performance-oriented organisational culture** in the form of **unpaid overtime or “presenteeism”** (Michie, 2002).

A model of stress at work



Imagine resource: Michie, 2002

However, people don't face stress exclusively at work, their load of stress and pressure is **accumulating from all life situations and environments**, and these spheres of human lives affect each other and jeopardise **work-life balance**.

Especially long or uncertain working hours, unexpected overtimes, the necessity of taking work home, long daily commuting etc. have a negative impact on family and social life, reducing time for leisure activities and recreation. Healthy lifestyle, including good interpersonal relationships, stable family life, enough sleep and outdoor activities are instrumental for building **stress resilience** (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022), which is an important buffer against the stress caused by work.

It goes the other way around too, domestic pressures such as childcare responsibilities, financial worries, bereavement, and housing problems may affect a person's robustness at work. Thus, a **vicious cycle** is set up in which stress is caused in either area of one's life (Michie, 2002).

To complete this Learning Unit, you have to:

- Read the text above
- Study the model of stress at work.
- Think of and write down the major stressors in your life. Which of them have an impact on your work? How could these be eliminated or reduced? Mark your responses to the worksheet (see the Annex).
- Watch the following video: Work related stress:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekDLeterpSk>

3. Learning Unit 3 - Work-related stress prevention and management

Work-related stress, especially long-term and chronic stress, is harmful for both employees and organisations. To avoid negative consequences of a stressful workplace, managers and HR professionals need to be aware of the issue, be able to recognise excessive work pressure, prevent and manage it. In organisational context, stress management can be seen as a part of strategic management, performance management, policies on employee care, development, and well-being programmes.

3.1 The role of HR managers

The HR manager is a key agent in dealing with stress at the workplace. The HR department, besides traditional operations such as recruitment, selection, hiring, onboarding, training and development, administration or offboarding, should be **the guardian of employees' well-being, fairness, and morality in the company**. Furthermore, HR professionals' goal is to attract and retain high-quality employees using their best potential to the good of the organisation. Stressed and demoralised employees are hardly able to fulfil their potential and achieve optimum performance. For this reason, for the good of employees, the organisation and eventually also the society, HR professionals have to be aware of work-related stress risks and capable of finding ways to increase workers' well-being and minimise workplace stress.

HR department's role includes:

- Monitor and identify potential stressors at the workplace (physical environment, work organisation, interpersonal relations).

- Assess the psychosocial risks of work-related stressors for employees and the organisation.
- Ensure minimisation of these psychosocial risks to prevent work-related stress (regularly analyse the work environment, organisational culture, offer programmes for employees' well-being).
- Provide support to employees in stress prevention and solution (in the form of individual consultation, providing opportunities to express concerns and difficulties at work, giving enough space to confide without being judged or persecuted).
- Provide support to managers in stress prevention and management (regular communication with managers, ability to propose appropriate arrangements to manage work-related stress in both managers and employees).
- Develop and sustain a well-being culture in the company.

Line and direct managers should be aware of the signs of employees suffering from stress, such as **decreased productivity** and **quality of work**. In some cases, reducing the workload, postponing deadlines and providing additional support may ease the level of pressure and solve the problem (Wilkie, 2020). In other cases, an HR professional should be involved to revise the work and propose systematic stress management strategies.

3.2 Work-related stress risk assessment

Work stress can be effectively managed only when the employer is aware of the risks. Responding to the following questions can help identify and assess the risks of work-related stress:

- Could work stress be affecting the health of our employees?
- Is there a system in place to monitor the stress risks in our organisation?
- Do our employees show signs of stress?
- What are the potential stressors?
- Is there an imbalance of work demand and resources?
- How can the stress problem be solved?

Approaches to exploring existing work-related stress risks:

There are two main sources of information needed for risk assessment: collection and analysis of (1) **quantitative** and (2) **qualitative data**.

- **Firstly**, monitor and assess employees' sickness absence, staff turnover, changes in individual and group performance levels, accidents and mistakes at the workplace, conflicts within teams, undesirable behaviours (violence and harassment) and notice any changes. Investigate any significant decline in any of the indicators. (Please note that this list of quantitative data is not exhaustive).

- **Secondly**, talk with managers and especially employees about their work, problems they might face and whether they feel the work is affecting their health. Ask about challenging situations and their reactions. Avoid asking directly if they “are stressed”. Instead, you can ask about three best and worst aspects of their job, exploring whether these are under their control and if they receive adequate support. Ask questions about specific jobs, working contexts and conditions to be able to identify the stressors (Leka, 2003). (Please note that this list of qualitative data is not exhaustive).

To conduct a thorough assessment of the well-being situation in your organisation, you can also refer to the Systematic Psychosocial Risk Assessment method mentioned in Module 2 of this Training Programme.

3.3 The prevention of work stress

It is always easier and wiser to prevent stress at the workplace than addressing its consequences. Furthermore, European and national legislation requires employers to assess and address all risks to employee health and safety, including their mental health.

There are numerous ways on how to prevent or at least minimise the risk of work stress. WHO divided three levels of prevention (Leka, 2003):

Primary prevention

In primary stress prevention, work stress is reduced through adequate **ergonomics** of the workplace and work environment, **work design**, and **organisational and management development**. A realistic and clear job description, clear organisation structure, assignment of roles and responsibilities as well as well-arranged work practices and operations are instrumental for preventing work-related stress. HR departments and managers should therefore pay close attention to these fundamental organisational aspects.

Once job descriptions, organisational structures and processes are set, management needs to make sure they are **clearly communicated to all employees**. The better employees understand their job, role and responsibilities, the more they will be able to direct the appropriate efforts towards doing it well. If they know what, when and how to do it, they will be less likely to feel under excessive pressure. At the same time, employees need to be offered enough opportunities to talk to their manager and be heard. Managers should communicate work expectations clearly, making sure they are comprehensible, consistent with the job description and acceptable to the employee, considering their skills, abilities, and existing workload.

Secondary prevention

The World Health Organisation proposes the design and implementation of company-specific and needs-driven **education and training** programmes (Leka, 2003). Such

programmes could include encouraging managers and employees to take part in webinars and courses on stress management, the development of organisational wellness programmes, offering fitness opportunities, yoga, and meditation sessions at workplace, or providing benefits promoting employees physical and mental health, relaxation and self-care. Useful are also training programmes strengthening employees' coping skills such as training on time management, problem solving, and communication. Moreover, the launch of Employee Assistance Programmes addresses work-related issues as well as stressors tied up to personal, family-specific or social risks and provides employees and their direct family members to ask for support, guidance and counselling with mental health professionals.

Tertiary prevention

Thirdly, WHO proposes reducing the impact of stress by developing a more **sensitive and responsible management system** and enhanced occupational health provision (Leka, 2003). Organisations need to work on creating a positive **climate and culture** and focus on raising awareness of the importance of employees' well-being and health among management and encourage managers to lead by example, applying good practices of stress prevention and management. In this way, the organisation will support the building of employees' **stress resilience**, helping them to cope with acute stress and preventing accumulation of stress from turning into chronic stress. Michie (2002) explains that training helps prevent stress through becoming aware of the signs of stress using this to interrupt behaviour patterns when the stress reaction is just the beginning. Training might also help develop skills of active coping and relaxation, developing a lifestyle that creates a buffer (resilience) against stress.

Additionally, Michie (2002) states general principles of preventing work-related stress applied in Scandinavia. These include:

- Adaptation of **working conditions** to people's differing physical and mental aptitudes (such as ASD).
- Giving employees the opportunity to **participate** in the design of their own work situation, and in the processes of change and development affecting their work.
- Designing technology, work organisation, and job content so that the employee is **not exposed to physical or mental strains** that may lead to illness or accidents.
- Avoiding or limiting **closely controlled or restricted work**.
- Designing work so that it provides opportunities for **variety, social contact, and cooperation** as well as coherence between different working operations.
- Providing opportunities for **personal and vocational development**.

3.4 Solutions to stress

The prevention and management of workplace stress requires **organisational level interventions**, because it is the organisation that creates the stress. An approach that is limited to helping those already experiencing stress is insufficient.

Only after having identified and assessed the existing or potential stressors at the workplace, can you evaluate and propose the most **adequate interventions** to help employees and teams to cope with work-related stress. For example, if the cause of stress is work overload and unsocial working hours, offering a yoga lesson at 7am won't have a very relaxing effect on the individual.

In the following section, we will present and discuss some strategies for the management and employees on **reduction or elimination of the stress causes**.

Cause of stress: problems with job content (monotony, under-stimulation, meaningless of tasks, lack of variety)

- **Solution - personal level:** Revision of the job content based on a close analysis of the job tasks, observation, and interviews with managers and especially workers on the job.
- **Solution - organisational level:** Employees must be given opportunities to speak with their managers and be involved to some extent in decision-making regarding their job content, given and asked for feedback. Work with employee's motivation.

Cause of stress: working overtime

- **Solution - management level:** Setting boundaries. Managers should avoid placing demands on employees during out-of-work hours. Employees may never get a mental break from being at work, knowing that their manager can call anytime (The important role HR plays in reducing workplace stress, 2019). Setting boundaries can help significantly. Boundaries can be identical with fixed working hours. In case of flexible working hours, there should be a shared calendar or system of "emergency shifts" when the employee knows that he/she may receive a work call also when not at work. However, these should not be unexpected and should make part of working hours or be recognised as paid overtime. That said, the boundaries must be respected by managers but also by employees, who for different reasons may work in the evenings. If this case occurs regularly, employees should talk to their manager and find out why they feel the need to work overtime.
- **Solution - organisational level:** Make sure workers are taking regular breaks during working hours, encourage managers to lead by example. Breaks are not only obligatory by law, it's also a time to take a rest, refresh, socialise with colleagues and arrange personal business such as taking an appointment with a doctor.

Cause of stress: overwhelming demands and workload

- **Solution - personal level:** Again, an analysis of the job, responsibilities and time required to perform work tasks is necessary. Supervising manager and the employee must be involved. This will allow you to revise and reduce the workload adequately.

Tasks can be redistributed among other employees; managers, colleagues or interns can also provide support. Identify if the problem is the amount of work or the lack of competencies. If the demands exceed the employee's competencies, consider providing them with additional training or reassigning the task to a more qualified colleague. If the problem lies in too many activities, involving an assistant or intern to whom supportive tasks can be delegated can resolve the problem with stressful workload.

- **Solution - organisational level:** Don't underestimate the importance of training. Nowadays, many work processes are rapidly moving to the digital environment, traditionally manual operations are being automated, and software is accelerating administration tasks. However, these achievements of the modern age are only helpful and make work more efficient if used properly. Some workers may find these transformations more difficult than others and need additional training or support.
- Some job roles are composed of very different tasks which may create strong pressure on employees. For example, if a worker has to communicate with clients, colleagues and partners, and at the same time work on the development of a product which requires a longer period of undisturbed concentration. In such a case, establishing "untouchable days" may be the right solution to provide the worker with the time to focus on deep creative work without disturbing the flow. An "untouchable day" is a day flagged in the calendar where nothing can interrupt the worker – no emails, calls, meetings. It can be two days a week, or one day in two weeks, depending on the needs and possibilities of the worker, team, and organisations. These days should be planned ahead and communicated with everyone who might be concerned. Read more about "untouchable days" [here](#).

Cause of stress: long or unsocial working hours, difficulties in balancing work and personal/social duties

- **Solution - management level:** If possible and relevant, allowing flexible working hours or partly remote work may resolve problems with working hours hindering work-life balance. If this is not possible for serious reasons concerning the organisation of work and the organisational goals, a predictable and well-designed shift system is necessary to enable employees to plan their time off work.

Cause of stress: lack of control over work

- **Solution - management level:** Allow employees' participation in decision-making in matters directly concerning their work, such as the pace, working hours, methods and the working environment. Provide opportunities to speak with managers and the HR department, employees must know that they are heard. Plan a regular team and 1:1 meeting with direct managers.

Cause of stress: interpersonal relations

- **Solution - organisational level:** Identify the core of interpersonal problems, observe the working environment, talk to employees and managers to find out what the stressors are. Some of the typical issues include unsupportive supervision, poor relationships with colleagues, isolated work, in the worst cases bullying, harassment and violence. The latter mustn't be tolerated and the manager together with the HR department must intervene immediately.
- Problems with teamwork and relations among workers as well as workers and managers can be improved with team-building activities (on-the-job, or even more effectively off-the-job). To be able to recognise and tackle issues in interpersonal relations provides open and transparent communication channels, encourage open and honest communication among team members and between employees and managers.
- **Solution - management level:** Problems with insufficient or unsupportive supervision can be prevented by providing managers with training in management and leadership skills, improving their management and communication style.

Evaluate all interventions applied to be able to assess their effectiveness and make the necessary improvements.

Finally, success in managing and preventing stress will depend on **the culture in the organisation**. A culture of **openness and understanding**, rather than of **blame and criticism**, is essential. Building this type of culture requires active leadership and role models from the top of the organisation, the development and implementation of a stress policy throughout the organisation, and systems to identify problems early and to review and improve the strategies developed to address them. A culture of involving people in decisions, keeping them informed about what is happening in the organisation, and providing good amenities and recreation facilities reduce stress (Michie, 2002).

3.5 Resilience building and individual stress management

Another way organisations can and should prevent and reduce work-related stress of their employees is raising awareness of and supporting the building of **stress resilience**.

Stress resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, or threats or significant sources of stress (The American Psychological Association). It's the ability to recognise and acknowledge that a situation has become stressful and choose a response that leads to the best solution and growth. On the other hand, it is not resistance or avoidance to stress. Even people with a great deal of resilience will still experience stress (Wagnild, 2022).

Building stress resilience is a long process but incorporating at least some of the following advice will help make it stronger and stronger over time and make it easier to get through stressful situations. Based on (Managing stress and building resilience – tips, Mind 2022).

1. Look after your well-being

Strengthen your well-being by finding time to spend with people you like, developing your interests and hobbies and being in nature. Find time to stop and relax. Importantly, look after your physical and mental health by getting enough sleep, eating healthily, and doing physical activities.

2. Build your support network

Being able to count on support from people you trust can make coping with stressful situations easier. It can be friends and family, mentors, managers and HR department at work, or support from peers.

3. Learn to recognise your stressors

Being able to identify what may trigger stress can help you prepare for it. Knowing what you can and cannot change could help you work out the best way to deal with stress. Try to go in your head through situations that come up often and that you worry about, such as attending a business meeting or giving a presentation. Try to stay on top of the situation and analyse it, think about the best way to cope with the situation. Reflecting on stressful situations may sometimes be upsetting. If the stress and pain are strong, consider talking to someone you trust about them.

4. Organise your time

- **In a working** environment, many people feel stressed because of having a lot of things to manage. In this case, changing the way we organise our time can help us feel more in control.
- Identify when you have the most energy. If you are “a morning person”, schedule the most important tasks at that time of the day to help you concentrate better.
- Create your personal to-do lists and prioritise the tasks. You might find it helpful to create a timetable, planning when to spend time on each task.
- Break down huge tasks in smaller steps and set smaller, achievable targets, it can help you feel more satisfied and in control.
- Vary your activities throughout your workday, balancing more demanding tasks with easier ones. If your job allows it, you can set a personal rule, that you will read and respond to emails only two hours a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, to have more undisturbed time for creative work.
- Multitasking is a highly required skill nowadays, but it is usually very stressful and not effective. Try not to do too much at once, focus on single tasks and on completing them well. Prioritise tasks to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

- Learn to say no. Let people know if their demands are unreasonable or unrealistic.
- Have breaks and take your time to relax during your working hours.
- If the work is too much or exceeds your capacity, ask for help. This applies to personal life too.

3.6 Stress relieving exercises at the workplace

We will conclude this module by proposing some simple **tips** and **exercises** which people can do directly in their workplace to calm down and cope with stressful situations.

1. Do something else

Is the work too much? You don't know what to do and feel that your stress is building up? Stop for a moment, step away from your work, and do something else.

- Read an article or a few pages of a book. Getting lost in another world can provide a welcome distraction from a stressful situation and return you to a calmer state.
- Make yourself a cup of tea. It can be a nice moment of alone time, meditation or chatting with a co-worker who's also on a tea break.

2. Move

- **Get up from your desk.** You can take a walk around the office, visit a colleague to leave a memo in person instead of emailing it. Running an errand, taking a letter to the Post Office, can provide a welcome distraction and a change of scenery for a few minutes.
- Do a few **stretching exercises** at your desk or if possible, in a relaxed area, it will help relieve the tension in your muscles and oxygenate your brain.
[Check these desk stretches to help you de-stress at work](#)
- With accumulation of stress, some muscles, especially in the neck and shoulders, can hurt. Try progressive muscle relaxation to let go of that tension. It can also be a nice breathing and meditation exercise. Close your eyes, breathe in with your nose and out with your mouth. Focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing your muscles, one group at a time. Start with your toes and work your way up to your neck.

3. Breathe

Many people don't pay much attention to something as vital as breath. Becoming more aware of your breath and performing a few deep breathing exercises can produce a natural relaxation response. Deep breathing increases the supply of oxygen to your brain and helps promote a state of calmness. Deep breathing is so powerful that The American Institute of Stress even named it the best stress reduction technique of all (Morin, 2015). Try some of these simple breathing exercises to help you overcome stressful situations and anxiety at work:

- **Mindful Diaphragmatic Breathing:** Get into a comfortable position, close your eyes, and start to notice your breath. Breathe normally while paying attention to the pace and depth. Is your breath deep, shallow, quick or slow? Just notice. Becoming aware of your breathing can help you to become more mindful of your body's response to stress and can help you notice when you need to deliberately relax your breathing.
- **Counted Breathing:** As you **inhale**, place your tongue on the roof of your mouth right behind your teeth, then breathe through your nose and **slowly count down from five**; on the **exhale**, let the air escape through your mouth and **count back up to eight**. Then repeat.
- **Visualisation Breathing:** As you **inhale**, imagine that all the stress in your body is coming from your extremities and into your chest. Then, as you **exhale**, imagine that the stress is leaving your body through your breath and dissipating right in front of you. Slowly, deliberately repeat the process (Scott, 2020).

4. Meditate

Deep breathing is an imperative for meditation, but if it doesn't seem enough and stressful thoughts seem to be haunting you, try a guided meditation. There are various mobile apps and videos available online. You just need to get in a comfortable position, put on headphones and start.

- Headspace Mini Meditation "[Let Go of Stress](#)" (1:06)
- Headspace Mini meditation "[Breathe](#)" (1:10)
- Headspace Mini meditation "[Managing Anxious Thoughts And Stress With Mindfulness](#)" (2:27)

To complete this Learning Unit, you have to:

- Read the text above
- Use the worksheet from the previous unit, review it and try to propose adequate solutions to workplace stressors you identified previously. Write your responses to the worksheet (See annex).
- Think of your daily routine and how it can be improved to help you strengthen your stress resilience. Try some of the stress-relieving exercises yourself.

4. Synopsis

Stress is the **body's reaction to feeling threatened or under pressure**. **Work-related stress** is the response people may have when presented with **work demands and pressures** that are **not matched to their knowledge and abilities** and which challenge their ability to cope. There are numerous **threats** of work-related stress both for **individuals and organisations**. For that reason, it's in organisations' best interest to prevent and reduce stress in the workplace. Work-related stress can come from many different **sources**,

including **work contents and context**. Organisations have to **assess stress risks** in the workplace and analyse the **stressors** to be able to take adequate actions for its prevention and reduction. Finally, every individual should be aware of the stress in their lives, take steps to build their **resilience** and learn some strategies of **active coping**.

5. Glossary

Stress - Stress is the body's reaction to feeling threatened or under pressure, a challenge or demand. It is the psychological and physical state that results when the resources of the individual are not sufficient to cope with the demands and pressures of the situation.

Stressor - A stressor is anything that causes the release of stress hormones. There are two broad categories of stressors: Physiological (or physical) stressors and Psychological Stressors (Stressors, 2017).

Stress management - Stress management offers a range of strategies to help you better deal with stress and difficulty (adversity) in your life. Managing stress can help you lead a more balanced, healthier life. Stress is an automatic physical, mental and emotional response to a challenging event (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 2021).

Work-life balance - the extent to which investment in roles is consistent with the importance or salience an individual places on a role (Kalliath and Brough, 2008). Work-life balance is achieved when personal resources are adequate to meet demands in work and family roles, thereby enabling effective participation in each domain (Voydanoff, 2002).

Stress resilience - Resilience is sometimes defined as a psychological process developed in response to intense life stressors that facilitates healthy functioning (Johnson et al., 2009). Stress resilience is the natural inborn ability to bounce back from the anxiety response that is an inevitable part of life (Seppala, 2021).

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7. Annexes: Worksheets

Module 5: Work-related stress management Unit 2 Causes of stress at workplace Worksheet	
My stressors What makes you feel stressed? Think of your work environment, situations, tasks and other stimuli.	My reaction to stress What is your body's reaction? How do you feel and act under pressure? (feelings, thinking, behaviour, physical symptoms)

Module 4: Work-related stress management
Unit 3 Work-related stress prevention and management
 Worksheet

My stressors	Possible preventive measures and solutions